

A COLLEGE STUDENT

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A friend told me his friend's experience studying in Chengdu, which typifies higher education for many young Tibetan men studying in such cities as Xining, Lanzhou, and Chengdu who, for the first time, are away from the close supervision of relatives and teachers.

BEGINNINGS

The morning of the day Dpal 'bum first started for Chengdu City, his mother, Mtsho mo, got up earlier than usual and prepared food. His stepfather, whom he called Uncle Bzang kho, had also risen and stepped to the back of the room where he burned the leaves of an aromatic plant to beseech the deities for blessings, particularly hoping that Dpal 'bum would successfully graduate in two years. Bzang kho awakened Dpal 'bum and told him to have breakfast, which included beef, bread, and milk tea – a common Tibetan meal. Bzang kho said, "Dpal 'bum, I found a school for you to study at, where you can realize the dream you tell us about everyday. Pack up after you finish eating."

Dpal 'bum was so excited by this unexpected announcement that he could hardly believe it. He gazed at his mother, who silently nodded yes. Suspicion erased from his mind, he darted into his bedroom and hurriedly packed a bag. Bzang kho and Mtsho mo smiled at the dining table. After a few minutes Dpal 'bum rushed out of his room and shouted, "Look, I'm ready!" Bzang kho took some money from his safe, handed it to Dpal 'bum, and said, "Take care of yourself, kid!"

Dpal 'bum's mother was almost in tears as she carried her son's bag. As mother and son walked to the bus stop, she repeatedly urged him to take care of himself, chant mantras and scriptures on the way, and work hard in school. Dpal 'bum nodded, got on the bus, and left, saying, "Good bye, Mother!"

Because there was no direct regular bus from Pad ma¹ County Town to Chengdu, he first took a bus to Rnga ba County Town.² He found a seat by a Tibetan woman who sat by a window, but they had no conversation. Time ticked by as Dpal 'bum dozed, listened to music on his MP3 player, and looked out the window. Four hours later, Dpal 'bum reached Rnga ba County Town. He disembarked, purchased a bus ticket to Chengdu the next day, found a cheap inn, and spent a quiet night alone.

He started off again the next morning. Nearly a day was required to reach Chengdu. In the evening, Mtsho mo's cell phone rang. It was Dpal 'bum, announcing that he had reached Chengdu, and had decided to find the school the next morning. Dpal 'bum's mother felt relieved.

It was a sunny September morning when Dpal 'bum woke the next day and put on his Tibetan robe. He was soon walking through the gate of his new school, Southwest University for Nationalities. A booth by the road leading from the gate was for new students who were told what to do. Dpal 'bum filled out a form and paid his tuition and registration, and then the clerk took him and some other new students to their dormitory and classroom, and showed them around the school. The class advisor held a class meeting that evening to familiarize the students with each other and the university. Dpal 'bum sat by Rdo rje, who was from Dkar mdzes Prefecture, Sichuan Province. Rdo rje was eager to know everything and Dpal 'bum was easygoing. They soon became close friends. Dpal 'bum had spent a busy day and his mother and stepfather were sincerely happy when he reported this in the evening.

THE FIRST TWO MONTHS AT UNIVERSITY

The new semester began with two weeks of military training. Dpal 'bum and Rdo rje were both assigned to the same class. PLA soldiers

¹ Pad ma County is located in Mgo log Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province.

² Rnga ba County is located in Rnga ba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province.

came to the school to teach the new students. Wearing newly issued camouflage uniforms, Dpal 'bum had few breaks and little time for meals. Furthermore, the sweltering temperatures of Chengdu City made Dpal 'bum think he would die of heat exhaustion. He and Rdo rje headed to their dorm or cafeteria after training, utterly spent. They felt thoroughly liberated when the training finished two weeks later. Both of them had chosen the challenging subject of Tibetan history as their major. In fact, Dpal 'bum could attend school not because of an exam score, but because his stepfather had bribed the appropriate officials. On account of his lower level of knowledge, he was far behind the others in his class. Actually, he could hardly understand what the teachers said.

Dpal 'bum resolved to study hard and with Rdo rje's help, Dpal 'bum's Tibetan improved to the extent that he could write short poems. He sent one of his creations to a Chengdu publisher who printed it in an anthology, and sent him a complimentary copy.

Dpal 'bum was exultant and decided to treat Rdo rje that night to celebrate. They went out and found a cheap restaurant. While sitting in the corner, a voice told them to not order. It was Nyi ma from Dkar mdzes. He had played basketball with Dpal 'bum the day before and now was with two other Tibetans, enjoying a fancy dinner and drinking beer. Dpal 'bum and Rdo rje were compelled to join them, as custom dictated. Dpal 'bum then enjoyed not only a wonderful meal but also drank beer with them. All of them, except Rdo rje, were drunk after several bundles of beer, which made Rdo rje uneasy. He asked Dpal 'bum to return to school several times, but he refused. Finally, Rdo rje helped Dpal 'bum to their dorm at midnight without saying goodbye to the others.

Dpal 'bum was very drunk, and as they stumbled back to the dormitory building, Dpal 'bum boasted that he had become a famous poet. "Rdo rje, you must buy me a bottle of beer, otherwise I won't move," said Dpal 'bum in a quavering voice, rolling on the ground. Rdo rje was annoyed but did as Dpal 'bum demanded. Later, when they finally staggered into their dorm room, Rdo rje kindly helped Dpal 'bum to his bed, took the empty bottle from his hand, undressed him, and put him to sleep.

At midnight, Rdo rje woke up with a raging thirst. He saw

Dpal 'bum was out of his bed and urinating in the toilet. He wasn't worried, because he knew Dpal 'bum was conscious. Rdo rje drank a cup of water and resumed sleeping. The next day at around noon, Rdo rje found Dpal 'bum still in bed and realized that Dpal 'bum was still drunk. Rdo rje woke him up and told him it was now afternoon. Though he had missed four classes that morning, Dpal 'bum thought it was worth it for he had had a good time with Nyi ma and the others. After finishing lunch in the school cafeteria, Dpal 'bum and Rdo rje studied together in the classroom.

Later, Nyi ma called and invited Dpal 'bum and Rdo rje to a bar to drink. Rdo rje refused, but Dpal 'bum accepted the invitation. They drank, danced, and sang. That night, Nyi ma's girlfriend, Sgron ma, had also come. She spoke Tibetan mixed with Chinese. In time, Dpal 'bum and Nyi ma became close friends, often cut classes, and spent an increasing amount of time together outside the university. Rdo rje knew how Nyi ma behaved in their home place and advised Dpal 'bum not to associate with him but, whenever he did, Dpal 'bum scolded him.

DPAL 'BUM'S GIRLFRIEND

Dpal 'bum felt unhappy and lonely at being single. Nyi ma realized that Dpal 'bum was depressed and suggested he find a girlfriend. In the beginning, Dpal 'bum was too shy to agree, though he was extremely eager. Nyi ma's persistent persuasion led Dpal 'bum to agree and Nyi ma then brought a girl with Sgron ma to the school playground where Dpal 'bum and Rdo rje were playing basketball. Sitting on the ground, Nyi ma shouted for Dpal 'bum to join them. Dpal 'bum stopped playing and ran to Nyi ma after ensuring he had been called. Dpal 'bum tried to hide his curiosity and bashfulness. "Who is she?" Dpal 'bum murmured in Nyi ma's right ear.

"She's the one I want to introduce you to," Nyi ma replied lightly.

Sgron ma broke in, and said, "This is my best friend, Zla sgron, who is from Mtsho ngon Province. We're classmates."

Dpal 'bum continued to be shy and nervous, but bravely

managed, "I'm Dpal 'bum, nice to meet you, Zla sgron!" and stretched out his right hand. After they shook hands, Nyi ma and his girlfriend left to give Dpal 'bum and Zla sgron time to become acquainted. This was the first time Dpal 'bum had been introduced to a girl by a matchmaker. While Dpal 'bum was quiet, Zla sgron was easygoing and kindhearted. Dpal 'bum immediately fell head over heels in love with her. She asked Dpal 'bum about his hometown and past, but asked no questions about their future relationship, which made him feel anxious.

He then courageously asked, "Do you have a boyfriend now?" Zla sgron felt taken aback and wondered why Dpal 'bum asked this.

"No!" she said, not looking at Dpal 'bum's face.

Dpal 'bum did not pursue this answer but moved closer to Zla sgron and began chatting. She took her cell phone from her trousers' pocket and switched it off. Soon Dpal 'bum's earlier reticence had vanished and they were sitting close to each other and chatting nonstop.

As darkness fell, Nyi ma and Sgron ma approached from a distance. Dpal 'bum stood, looked at the school gate, and noticed them. He asked Zla sgron for her phone number, wrote it down, and said, "Would you like to be my girlfriend now?" She silently lowered her head in embarrassed consent.

By this time, Nyi ma and Sgron ma had arrived and suggested they go to a bar for a drink. They then took a taxi to a fancy bar where Nyi ma and Dpal 'bum were regulars. After Zla sgron had several cups of liquor, she was confused, kissed Dpal 'bum's cheek, put an arm around his neck, and said, "I want you to protect me. I hope you'll give me some proof of your love." These words were as though carved on Dpal 'bum's half-drunk heart.

DPAL 'BUM'S HOLIDAY PLAN

The winter holiday was drawing near and Dpal 'bum was wallowing in an unoccupied, indolent life with his new girlfriend. His teachers told him countless times to prepare for the end-of-term exams, but their words fell on deaf ears. Dpal 'bum's head teacher then decided to

call his parents, but did not when Dpal 'bum promised to pass all his examinations. Dpal 'bum was amazed when he at long last opened his textbook and began reviewing. His books were new and he understood almost nothing. It was as though he had never seen those books before.

Two days before the exams, Dpal 'bum had no other choice but to make cheat sheets, and passed the exams by using them. Reporting his scores to his family over the phone, Dpal 'bum asked for a reward from his stepfather. Bzang kho and Mtsho mo were delighted with the news, put 800 *yuan* in Dpal 'bum's bank account the next day, and then waited hopefully for Dpal 'bum's return. Dpal 'bum was not satisfied with the amount of his reward because he wanted to buy an expensive cell phone for his girlfriend as a birthday gift, but he could not afford it. He decided to take a part-time job and so he asked for work at the bar where he and Nyi ma often drank. The proprietor knew Dpal 'bum and his friends often frequented his bar and arranged a night job as a waiter that paid twelve *yuan* an hour. Gradually Dpal 'bum was absorbed in his work and did not want to return home during the winter holiday. He phoned home and said, "I won't return. I registered for a training class to improve my Chinese." The seriousness of Dpal 'bum's tone moved his parents who agreed that Dpal 'bum should stay in Chengdu. Meanwhile, he continued working in the bar.

NEW YEAR'S DAY

Two days before the Tibetan New Year, the house decorations and food preparations were done. The only thing Dpal 'bum's mother couldn't do was set off firecrackers, as in most A mdo Tibetan places, firecrackers are set off by men. Bzang kho had left to make purchases. Mtsho mo then persuaded Dpal 'bum to return to set off firecrackers.

On New Year's Eve, Bzang kho returned home with many items, including an expensive warm sheepskin robe for Dpal 'bum as a New Year gift. Dpal 'bum had never owned a wool robe in his life. On New Year's Eve, wrapped in his new robe, Dpal 'bum and his family put out the food they had, covering the table with mutton,

beef, pork, meat dumplings, fried bread, and many kinds of fruit on wooden plates. They then enjoyed a delicious meal of meat dumplings. The traditional way of celebrating the New Year had gradually become Chinese in the place where they lived. Most local Tibetans did not sleep that night because they believed that the New Year began at exactly midnight, when everyone started visiting, which Dpal 'bum had little interest in. Instead, he stayed at home and helped greet visitors. Many of Bzang kho's workmates came to visit and drank Chinese liquor. One of Bzang kho's friends asked Dpal 'bum to drink with them, but Mtsho mo and Bzang kho said he should not. They thought Dpal 'bum had never touched liquor or smoked. Bzang kho and his visitors drank until dawn while Dpal 'bum and Mtsho mo served them.

DPAL 'BUM'S PLEDGE

In late winter, the sun shone in the lofty sky and the weather was warming, hinting at spring's approach. Dpal 'bum's family was enjoying the sunshine on their verandah one day after finishing a good lunch. Dpal 'bum's cell phone rang and his friend A du asked him to play basketball on the local primary school playground. As he was leaving, Mtsho mo asked him curiously who had invited him. Dpal 'bum's mother had repeatedly told him to avoid bad friends. Dpal 'bum didn't tell her it was A du, a man Dpal 'bum's age who had been expelled from school, and disowned by his parents for unforgiveable behavior. Dpal 'bum hastily said, "It was one of my schoolmates," and then hurried away.

A du and others were already playing basketball with some monks from Rnga ba County as Dpal 'bum reached the playground. A few hours later the intense competition was over, and Dpal 'bum and A du had lost. Most players left because of impending darkness. Only Dpal 'bum and A du remained on the playground. A du handed Dpal 'bum a cigarette and took another for himself. That was the first time Dpal 'bum had smoked during the holiday for he was regarded locally as an upright student. They were exhausted and lay on the side of the basketball court. After a while A du took Dpal 'bum to a bar near the

school, and asked him to drink. Dpal 'bum found it hard to refuse.

Hours passed, and Dpal 'bum decided that his mother would surely have gone to bed, and so returned home. He was conscious that he had drunk more than A du. He noiselessly slowed and entered the home when he got to his home gate. Unexpectedly the light came on and Mtsho mo yelled, "Is it my son, Dpal 'bum?"

Dpal 'bum said nothing, fearing Mtsho mo would smell the beer on his breath. When Mtsho mo approached with his supper, she immediately detected the odor of beer. Tears streamed from her eyes. She knew beating or scolding Dpal 'bum was useless, since he was no longer a boy. Dpal 'bum regretfully tried to persuade her to stop weeping, and finally, Dpal 'bum also wept, embraced his mother, and vowed to stop smoking and drinking.

After a while, Mtsho mo handed Dpal 'bum a bowl of dumplings, and returned to bed.

RETURN TO SCHOOL

A new term started with spring's approach. With his pledge to not drink and smoke, Dpal 'bum returned to school for a new beginning. The school had changed Dpal 'bum and Rdo rje's room to another building further from the classrooms. As he unpacked, Dpal 'bum felt confused, because the new dorm was not as comfortable as the previous one. This change made all the students disgruntled. Dpal 'bum led them to the teacher in charge of their class, but nothing could be done. The school said that the building Dpal 'bum and others had stayed in had been designated for new students. Hopelessly, Dpal 'bum and others left, returned to their assigned dormitory, and unhappily settled in.

In the afternoon, Dpal 'bum had forgotten this misfortune, since his girlfriend would soon arrive from Zi ling. Two hours before her train reached the station, Dpal 'bum was already in the waiting room. The day before Zla sgron left Zi ling for Chengdu was her birthday and she had spent the day with her parents. Dpal 'bum had prepared a gift of a cell phone that had cost 2,000 RMB. Originally he had wanted to give it to her on her birthday, but he had been far away

at that time.

Finally, Zla sgron's train arrived, and passengers crowded out the exit. Dpal 'bum held a small wrapped box and carefully looked for Zla sgron. In the crowd of strange moving faces, Dpal 'bum eventually found her, rushed over, and said, "Are you tired from the long trip?" taking her luggage.

"Yes!" she replied, "Let's find a hotel, I want to rest."

Dpal 'bum handed his gift to her and said, "Hope it's not too late to wish you a happy birthday!" She was delighted, embraced Dpal 'bum, and on the way to the hotel, they strolled arm in arm, laughing and joking.

A LIE

A month passed and winter's frost gave way to warm summer weather. The hot weather in Chengdu City encouraged people to remove their heavy clothes. Wearing a white T-shirt, Dpal 'bum was delighted by the weather, but anxious about the coming weekend's expenditures. He had not planned his allowance well. He attended four hours of Tibetan classes in the morning, and decided to play basketball on an empty stomach. The playground was full of students because the weekend was approaching. Dpal 'bum dashed directly to the basketball court and joined a group of five Han students. After several rounds, Nyi ma and three other boys showed up and joined them. Dpal 'bum had met Nyi ma only several times since the beginning of the term for he had promised his mother that he would not associate with bad students.

"Why haven't you called me recently? Did you forget your friend?" Nyi ma asked Dpal 'bum during a break.

"No, I've been busy with homework," Dpal 'bum replied.

Nyi ma laughed and the others joined in. "You never do homework! Anyway, we will hold a circle dance here in the stadium tomorrow night. I hope you will come with your girlfriend," Nyi ma said, handing him a cigarette.

Dpal 'bum said, "Thanks, but I've quit smoking. I'll be glad to come here tomorrow night," and then he left for his dorm, wondering

how to get money for the next evening. He could only think of lying to his stepfather, and then called Uncle Bzang kho. He told him convincingly that the school had ordered each student to contribute 1,000 RMB.

"Didn't they collect 500 RMB last month?" Uncle Bzang kho asked suspiciously.

"That was a class requirement, but this time our school has demanded this and urged us to do it as soon as possible," Dpal 'bum answered.

Bzang kho was persuaded and said, "OK, I'll put a deposit in your account tomorrow." Dpal 'bum then rushed into his dorm room with a yell that frightened and roused Rdo rje from his afternoon nap. Dpal 'bum then borrowed 200 RMB from Rdo rje with a promise that he would return it the next day. Dpal 'bum's empty stomach was grumbling for he hadn't eaten the whole day. He then called Zla sgron and enjoyed a nice supper with her.

CIRCLE DANCING

In the late morning of the following day, as sunbeams were warmly flowing through the window into Dpal 'bum's dorm room, he roused from his two-tiered bunk bed and sleepily rubbed his eyes that seemed to have been glued shut with gum. He got up and put on a newly washed suit. He knew that his roommates had already left to study and conduct other personal business. Dpal 'bum walked to the student canteen by himself after washing his hands and face. At the entrance to the student dining hall he accidentally met Zla sgron, who was still in her pajamas, holding a thermos in her right hand and two pieces of bread in a plastic bag in the other hand.

"Dpal 'bum, why are you staring like that?" Zla sgron asked in surprise, waving a hand before Dpal 'bum's eyes.

He jumped as though frightened, and said, "No reason! Have you eaten?" and brushed aside a strand of Zla sgron's hair with his right hand.

Zla sgron munched on a piece of bread and said, "Ha! I am now," smiling cutely. Dpal 'bum took her thermos and led her into

the dining room, because he did not want to eat alone. They headed to Zla sgron's dorm after eating because she needed to put on appropriate clothes for the coming circle dance. Dpal 'bum waited outside the dorm, checking his cell phone. Approximately half an hour later, he was exhausted from waiting. Eventually she emerged wearing sunglasses and approached Dpal 'bum.

"Were you washing your face or your body?" Dpal 'bum asked jokingly, hinting that he had been waiting a long time.

"This is what girls are like!" replied Zla sgron. It was still two hours before the event began. To kill time they walked to a cybercafé near the school and spent time using chat programs and playing computer games. Since Dpal 'bum had parted with Nyi ma and stopped drinking, the Internet bar had become his favorite hangout. He spent most of his allowance on computer games and was now addicted to them. Nyi ma called and they left for school. Many Tibetan students in Tibetan dance robes had made a large circle and were ready to start.

A big fire customarily blazed in the middle of the circle, but this had been replaced by a heavy sound box. The school would not permit a fire. Many dancers and a large audience had gathered. The sound of applause was ceaseless, encouraging Dpal 'bum, Zla sgron, and other dancers. The onlookers, absorbed in the strong rhythm of the Tibetan songs and the dancers' nimble steps, formed a large circle, and tried to learn the steps from the performers. After about two hours, the dancers and bystanders were ready to leave, including Dpal 'bum and Zla sgron. Their smiles proved it had been a happy time.

DPAL 'BUM'S MISFORTUNE

Approximately two months into the last semester of studies, students in Dpal 'bum's grade were intensively preparing their graduation theses after nearly two years of study. They would soon leave the university, hopefully with a two-year college degree. One Friday evening, Dpal 'bum was returning to his dorm after eating. When he got to the school gate, he saw Zla sgron there, talking and laughing

with a boy. They were holding hands, and were unaware that Dpal 'bum was observing them. Disappointedly, Dpal 'bum hung back, pretending not to see them, but then his indignation overwhelmed him and he shoved in front of Zla sgron and the boy. "What are you doing here, Zla sgron?" he inquired gravely.

She panicked, not knowing what to say. "Who is he?" Dpal 'bum angrily demanded. Zla sgron still made no response. Tears streamed down Dpal 'bum's cheeks, because Zla sgron dared not look at him, not even so much as a glance. Enraged, Dpal 'bum ripped a necklace that Zla sgron had given him from around his neck, flung it on the ground in front of Zla sgron, and dashed to his dorm. He lay on his bed, wrapped in his quilt so tightly he could hardly breathe. Rolling on his bed again and again, he was unable to think about anything except Zla sgron and that boy. Tears spontaneously streamed from his eyes. It was the first time he had wept over a girl.

Eventually, he decided to go to a bar for a few drinks to ease his pain. When something sad and unbearable happened, alcohol helped him forget. The bar was full of students when he entered. He chose an empty seat in the corner and ordered three bottles of beer. He noticed Nyi ma's girlfriend nearby, drinking by herself, looking unhappy and lonely. She approached Dpal 'bum and greeted him. They sat together and began to share their troubles, as their table became littered with an ever-increasing number of beer bottles. They both vomited at around midnight.

Dpal 'bum then found a hotel near the bar, booked a room, and helped her up to the room. When Dpal 'bum woke up the next morning he found Sgron ma sleeping by him. She was naked. He was embarrassed, dressed, and left without waking her. On the way to his dorm, Dpal 'bum was terribly worried Nyi ma would find out. He suddenly stopped walking and dashed back to the hotel to urge Sgron ma not to tell Nyi ma that she had slept with him. As he rushed into the room, he found Nyi ma there, arguing with Sgron ma. Dpal 'bum quietly backed out and closed the door, alerting Nyi ma. Nyi ma flung open the door, grabbed his shirt collar, and demanded, "What did you do with my girlfriend last night?" He became enraged when Dpal 'bum didn't answer and slammed his fist into Dpal 'bum's face. Sgron ma then grabbed Nyi ma and stopped him from landing more blows.

Dpal 'bum knew Nyi ma had been his best friend at one point and that the mistake was his.

"I am the cause of this. I did it to take revenge. Don't scold him," Sgron ma said, which calmed Nyi ma.

Nyi ma shouted, "Get out! We're no longer friends!"

Sgron ma persuaded Dpal 'bum to leave. Dpal 'bum did not know what to say, so he left, realizing he had lost a good friend and a new lover, and that he had broken his vow.

A TEACHER'S CRITICISM

Since that day, gloom and disappointment filled Dpal 'bum's heart and mind. He frequently skipped class, was out at night drinking, and returned the next morning to sleep the whole day in his dorm. Sometimes, he bothered other students when he got drunk and fought with them. He never called his family except when he wanted cash. Everything he did at that time suggested that he had been possessed by a demon.

Late one night, Dpal 'bum was returning to his dorm. He could hardly walk because of his drunkenness, though he was entirely conscious. A stranger blocked his path as he reached the corner of his dorm building. He was about Dpal 'bum's height, bumped into Dpal 'bum, and then inquired sharply, "Why are you bumping me?" and fixed his eyes on Dpal 'bum. Everything was hazy and cold. Dpal 'bum strained his eyes, but did not recognize the man.

"You bumped into me, man!" Dpal 'bum replied after a long pause.

The man grabbed Dpal 'bum's neck with one hand and said, "Let's see how brave you are!" and punched Dpal 'bum in the belly. Dpal 'bum fought back and, as they rolled on the ground, two men dashed up from behind. One struck Dpal 'bum's forehead with a half a brick. Dpal 'bum fell unconscious and the men fled. After he regained consciousness, he stood, realized that one of his shoes was missing, and started hopping about in search of the missing shoe. His forehead was unbearably painful and gushing blood, so he wrapped his jacket around it. He gave up searching for his shoe and continued

to his dorm. A flashlight shone on him, dazzling his eyes.

An old man, a school guard, approached, wrapped in a huge green military coat. "What are you doing here?" the guard asked Dpal 'bum in Sichuan Chinese dialect.

Dpal 'bum turned and replied, "Nothing! It's OK!" The old man was worried when he saw blood soaking the jacket around Dpal 'bum's head, and convinced Dpal 'bum to go to a nearby hospital. "Let me help you to the hospital," the guard said in a kind voice. Dpal 'bum refused at first, but eventually accepted the old man's assistance, as the increasing pain made him vomit. Dpal 'bum returned to his dorm room from seeing a doctor with his head wrapped in white gauze and went directly to bed.

In the afternoon when students had finished their morning classes, Rdo rje, rushed into the room and awakened Dpal 'bum, who sat up and touched his injured head. The wound was no longer as painful as before. "How is your head? Teacher Bsod noms ordered me to bring you to his office," Rdo rje said in concern. Teacher Bsod noms was Dpal 'bum's favorite teacher and his class's head teacher. He was kindhearted and regarded all his disobedient students with profound patience.

"This time I will be scolded," Dpal 'bum thought on the way to the office. He hung back as he reached the office, feeling afraid. Then Teacher Bsod noms appeared in the hall with a cup of boiled water. "Haven't seen you for a long time, Dpal 'bum. Come in," Teacher Bsod noms said as Dpal 'bum stood still, his head bent, standing rigidly at the door. Dpal 'bum followed. "What happened to you? You're getting worse and worse!" Teacher Bsod noms shouted and turned to Dpal 'bum so suddenly that Dpal 'bum was frightened. Teacher Bsod noms's voice became louder and louder as if announcing to all in the hall that he was scolding Dpal 'bum. The criticism lasted for almost half an hour and his tone slowly became gentler and slower. "The school was going to dismiss you, but I stopped them. Now you can go," said Teacher Bsod noms. Disappointment filled his face.

Dpal 'bum started to leave without knowing what to do, tears streaming down his face. "Dpal 'bum, you only have one month left and this better not happen again. I'm watching you," Teacher Bsod

nams added seriously. Dpal 'bum appreciated this show of concern, and left.

THE FINAL EXAMINATION

The sun had vanished behind ominous clouds, taking a break from warming the city. The air took on the feel of rain. Dpal 'bum snored, wrapped in a thin blanket. His other roommates had departed for their classroom early to nervously prepare for the final examination. When it was the time for breakfast, Rdo rje returned to his dorm room with some bread and a thermos full of boiled water. "Sleepy Dpal 'bum, get up!" said Rdo rje jokingly. "You'll be late if you continue sleeping. I've brought you some bread."

Dpal 'bum stuck his head out of the blanket, and rolled over in bed. "What time is it, Rdo rje?" Dpal 'bum asked, reluctantly raised his head, and then walked to the toilet wearing only his underwear.

"We have only thirty minutes!" replied Rdo rje when Dpal 'bum returned. Dpal 'bum put on a fashionable jacket with many pockets, and combed his hair. "Let's go. I'll eat this bread on the way," said Dpal 'bum hurriedly. They went downstairs and headed to the teaching building where examinees were crowded at the gate. "What's the first subject?" inquired Dpal 'bum, his mouth half full of bread.

"Tibetan. Good luck on your test!" replied Rdo rje, murmuring scriptures. Invigilators were already at the gate. After sternly announcing the rules of the test, they unbolted the door. Rdo rje and Dpal 'bum were separated in different examination rooms, which annoyed Dpal 'bum. He found his seat. Everything was so silent that he could hear his heart throbbing. Two teachers invigilated each examination room, and one of them declared the start of the test after handing out the papers. Dpal 'bum was frightened by the difficulty of the test, and began regretting not reviewing. He had arrogantly expected that the Tibetan test would be no challenge for him, especially since he had published a poem in an acknowledged book. Examinees in the same room were deeply absorbed in the test, which made Dpal 'bum uneasy and impatient. He hoped the time

would pass rapidly.

After the exams, all the examinees, including Rdo rje, were discussing the test in front of the building. "How did you do?" Rdo rje asked Dpal 'bum in concern. Dpal 'bum looked extraordinarily depressed and did not reply.

Rdo rje noticed Dpal 'bum's expression and immediately changed the subject. "Let's go back to the dorm and pack our belongings," said Rdo rje. When they entered their room, the other roommates had already started packing, and were excitedly commenting on how they would soon be back at home. "Don't be depressed," said Rdo rje, putting his arm around Dpal 'bum's shoulder. As Dpal 'bum packed a few clothes into a suitcase, he realized his bookcase had only one book. Depression and remorse filled his heart again. He ascended the stairs to the roof of his dormitory building without finishing packing. Atop the roof, he solitarily recalled everything from the last two years. He could see many students below leaving. Tears flowed down his cheeks, an expression of his sincere regret, but it was too late to change anything.

Three days later, the school announced their scores and praised those who had excelled. Dpal 'bum had failed his exams and was thus unable to get a graduation certificate.

BACK HOME

The graduates separated in different directions, returning to where they had come from as their schooling ended. Dpal 'bum terminated his college life in deep despair and bitter remorse. He packed all his belongings in a case with two wheels on each side, and trudged to the bus stop pulling it with his right hand. The school atmosphere was tranquil. It seemed as though birds were the main actors in the schoolyard, for the only thing that could be heard was their chirping and the flapping of their wings. Walking along a gravel path to the school gate, he was excited about returning home but, at the same time embarrassed, for he had learned nothing and could not get his graduation certificate. He caught sight of his former girlfriend, Zla

sgron, from the corner of his eye. She was carrying a black bag on her back that was so heavy that it almost touched the ground. Dpal 'bum pretended not to see her, and chose an alternative path to evade her, but she caught up to him at the gate. "Dpal 'bum, are you going home?" Zla sgron blurted out.

He turned without making a response, and saw Zla sgron panting, standing rigidly behind him. The heavy bag on her back and the blazing summer sun made her sweat profusely. "Yeah, what would I do if I didn't return home?" Dpal 'bum replied, his face's dark expression showing he was still angry with her.

She realized how he felt, but the heavy bag on her back prompted her to say, "Could you escort me, if we are going the same way to the bus stop?" She stared at Dpal 'bum emotionlessly.

When Dpal 'bum saw she really needed help, he took her heavy pack, put it on his back, and then silently handed her the handle to his suitcase. They then went to the street to hail a cab. As they stood silently on the curb, a green taxi stopped. Dpal 'bum loaded their luggage in the boot, they clambered into the taxi, and twenty minutes later reached the bus stop. Putting the pack down on the ground, Dpal 'bum said, "Take good care of yourself. I'm leaving."

Zla sgron was embarrassed by this expression of concern and replied, "Please, phone me, I'm sorry about..." but dared not look at Dpal 'bum's face.

"It's finished. No need to mention it," responded Dpal 'bum, without allowing her to complete her last sentence, and left, dragging his suitcase. Tears streamed down Zla sgron's cheeks and plopped on to the pavement, but Dpal 'bum was not there to witness this display of regret.

Dpal 'bum reached his hometown after two days of travel. His mother had come to meet him. "Were there any problems on the way?" she asked. Seeing the wrinkles on her face, he realized that his mother had aged, as if ten years had passed.

"It was a smooth trip," answered Dpal 'bum. He was afraid she would ask about his diploma, since that was the only thing his mother would understand as proving her son had obtained something of value from the school. He entered his home followed by his mother. The walls and ceiling were spotted with dust and smoke

that was darker than before. Nobody had cleaned it, as his mother was not tall enough to reach the ceiling. Dpal 'bum put his luggage in a corner, pleased that his stepfather was not there.

"Mother, where is Uncle?" he asked.

His mother stepped from the kitchen holding two dishes of food and said, "He went to Zi ling for a meeting two days ago and probably won't return today," she said, putting the food on a table, and then headed back to the kitchen for more dishes. His stepfather's absence made Dpal 'bum a bit relaxed and gave him more time to ponder how to explain his disastrous school results. After he finished eating, Dpal 'bum said he was going to see a friend in the county town, and left. His mother was extremely curious about what was in Dpal 'bum's suitcase, and opened it. To her disappointment, she saw neither certificate nor gifts, only a few old clothes, kindling her suspicions. It was almost midnight when Dpal 'bum returned. He gently pushed open the unbolted door, and tiptoed in, trying his best not to awaken his mother. As he reached his bedroom, he found his mother weeping on his bed. He turned on the light and ran to her. She immediately wiped away her tears with her sleeve.

"Mother, what happened?" Dpal 'bum asked quietly, patting her back with his hand.

"It's you! Where is your graduation certificate?" she asked in a quivering voice.

"Mother, I... how did you know?" Dpal 'bum said, then confided everything, except his broken vows. His mother burst into wails, tears falling on her robe like pearl beads.

"Your uncle will be furious," she concluded and left for her bed. Dpal 'bum was again convinced of how much she loved him, since she had not scolded him.

The following day Dpal 'bum cleaned the home from top to bottom to please his mother and his stepfather. The rooms were as clean as new ones. Dpal 'bum and his mother patiently waited for Bzang kho, who arrived in the evening with two of his workmates. He was delighted to see the home so neat and tidy and immediately praised Dpal 'bum, whom he introduced to his companions. He added that he had just graduated from university. His workmates were glad to see Dpal 'bum and suitably impressed that he was a

college graduate. After a while, Uncle Bzang kho asked Dpal 'bum to show them his diploma. Dpal 'bum and his mother were shocked and their faces turned red. Bzang kho pressed Dpal 'bum to bring it quickly. At that moment Dpal 'bum's mother said that he had lost it.

Bzang kho immediately stood and shouted, "What? You lost it. Are you still a child?" This frightened the guests, who unsuccessfully tried to calm him. Dpal 'bum lowered his head, sat on a chair near the TV holding a cup of tea, and listened to his stepfather's criticism with trembling legs. In such an embarrassing situation, the guests left. Uncle Bzang kho's shouts still filled the room as he poured out his disappointment. After about two hours of shouting, Bzang kho was exhausted and hoarse, and then wearily walked to the bedroom he shared with Dpal 'bum's mother.

NON-ENGLISH TERMS

'Phrin las nyi ma འཕྲིན་ལས་ནི་མ། (Chenli Nima 陈立尼玛)

A du ཨ་དུ།

A mdo ཨ་མདོ།

Bsod nams བསོད་ནམས།

Bzang kho བཟང་ཁོ།

Chengdu 成都

Dkar mdzes དཀར་མཛེས།

Dpal 'bum དཔལ་འབུམ།

Lanzhou 兰州

Mgo log མགོ་ལོག།

Mtsho mo མཚོ་མོ།

Mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྔོན།, Qinghai 青海

Nyi ma ་མ།

Pad ma པད་མ།

Qiang རྒྱུག་

Rdo rje རོ་རྗེ།

Rnga ba རྩ་བ།, Aba 阿坝

Sgron ma སྒྲོན་མ།

Sichuan སུའུ་ཁྲུལ་

Southwest University for Nationalities 西南民族大学

Xi'an International Studies University 西安外国语大学

yuán 元

Zi ling ཟི་ལིང་།, Xining 西宁

Zla sgron ཟླ་སྒྲོན།